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ABSTRACT

A preliminary report from the National Commission on the High School Senior Year confirms that the senior year of high school is a time of little significant academic engagement for many U.S. students. This wasted year affects both high and low achievers. Those who have gained early admission to college may not work much the rest of the year, and those who are not going to college may exhibit a "party time" mentality. Compounding the problem is the fact that many students work long hours for spending money and have little time for school work. Many remedies have been suggested, and several programs are described that place increased academic demands on students. The National Commission on the High School Senior Year has planned to release recommendations on restructuring K-12 education in June 2001. College-level study in high school can provide students academic challenges while enabling them to earn credits that may reduce their eventual college costs. There are many issues related to college-level study in high school that must be explored to make greater expectations for college students come true. (SLD)

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Lesser and Greater Expectations: The Wasted Senior Year and College-Level Study in High School

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ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.
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Greater Expectations National Panel

LESSER AND GREATER EXPECTATIONS: THE WASTED SENIOR YEAR AND COLLEGE-LEVEL STUDY IN HIGH SCHOOL

prepared by Ross Miller, AAC&U

About the "Wasted Senior Year"

National life and the economy are changing much faster than our schools. Schools and communities need to respond by serving our students better. Our nation faces a deeply troubling future unless we transform the lost opportunity of the senior year into an integral part of students' preparation for life, citizenship, work, and further education.

A preliminary report from the National Commission on the High School Senior Year confirms that the senior year of high school is a time of little significant academic engagement for many American students. It seems very strange that such a pattern has developed while there is considerable local, state, and national pressure to raise achievement. Most students cannot afford to squander this time for learning; according to the Commission's report, fully one-third to one-half of secondary students may founder after high school from their lack of knowledge and skills. While investigating the senior year, the Commission found problems in the quality of instruction and advising, in the alignment between secondary school outcomes and the requirements for post-secondary education and work, and near-universal lack of communication among educators from elementary through higher education.

The wasted senior year affects both high and low achievers. Having gained early admission to college, some students choose to "blow off" the rest of the school year. There are rarely consequences for falling grades once an individual is admitted to a college. Non-college bound students may exhibit a "party-time" mentality for much of the senior year. Interviews conducted by the Commission revealed students not wanting to be in school, being bored with schoolwork, and feeling that only the top students receive teacher attention.

Compounding the problem is another distraction -- working long hours. "No other advanced country expects students to work, or permits them to work long hours just to have spending money."

Psychologist Laurence Steinberg has found that with 15-20 hours per week at work, 20-25 hours/week spent socializing, 15 hours in extra-curricular activities, and 15 hours watching television, students have little time left for studying. Sadly, students are able to maintain such schedules because schools and parents do not demand that significant time be spent on homework or school projects.

Where tests are required for graduation, they often demand only ninth or tenth grade level work. Since students may pass the tests as early as tenth grade, little motivation remains for sustained effort over the next two years.

Graduation requirements vary by district, but may be set so low that seniors need to enroll in only two or three courses to earn a diploma. The schools themselves are sending messages that the senior year is a time of low academic expectations.

Data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) show that our high school students perform very poorly compared to students of other nations. With only one-third of seniors in the United States even enrolled in mathematics or science study -- lower than the average *of all countries participating in the assessment* -- one should not be surprised at such test results. TIMMS data also show that US seniors spend fewer hours on homework and *three times more than the international average at jobs*.

Suggested solutions to lagging high school achievement abound. Leon Botstein advocates a solid high school curriculum that allows students to earn a diploma after grade 10. Students would then advance to an experience appropriate to their maturity level: community college, four-year college or technical vocational training. Secondary school curricula and teaching would be restructured so that all students would achieve important planned outcomes in a shorter time.

The PASS program in the state of Oregon proposes a two-level high school certificate system -- a Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM -- typically earned in the 10th grade) and a Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM -- typically earned in 12th grade). High standards for earning the certificates are maintained; time spent in study to prepare to qualify may vary from student to student. The outcomes of the CAM (as suggested by the National Center on Education and the Economy) are very similar to those suggested by Botstein for the two years following his 10th grade diploma.

The Rochester (NY) schools recently announced the "Pathways Initiative" whereby students can plan to take more or less time to complete high school. The standards for earning a New York State Regents Diploma remain constant; students may choose several study pathways to get to graduation. Both the longer and shorter programs provide for summer study and other opportunities to meet individual needs. The program is scheduled to begin in fall 2001.

All three of these suggested revisions to high school place increased academic demands upon students, require more students to produce at least moderately

advanced levels of work to earn a diploma, and prepare students for challenging educational and career opportunities following high school. Dozens of school reform models and individual schools with outstanding leadership promote the same or higher goals and achieve excellent results. Such practices, though, spread slowly.

Several conclusions and recommendation from the Commission pertain to the National Panel's work:

- The K-12 system is poorly aligned and has not established reliable lines of communication with postsecondary education and the world of work.
- Students may easily encounter four different sets of requirements governing what they need to do to 1) graduate from high school, 2) be admitted to college, 3) be permitted to enroll in credit-bearing college courses, or 4) get a job.
- The conditions of modern life require that *all students* graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in both postsecondary education and careers.
- Ideally, beginning in the middle school years, every student would have a "learning plan," a formal but flexible outline of what the student hopes to accomplish in young adulthood and which education, work, and service experiences can best help him or her to attain those goals. (See National Panel Briefing Paper No. 16 for a similar suggestion from the National Assoc. of Secondary School Principals.)

The Commission will release recommendations for restructuring K-12 schooling to improve achievement in June 2001.

About college-level study in High School:
Figures from the College Board show that last year, over 750,000 students completed 1.2 million Advanced Placement exams. The benefits of AP study are touted on the College Board web site:

AP gives you the chance to try college-level work in high school, and to gain valuable skills and study habits for college. If you get a "qualifying" grade on the AP Exam, there are thousands of colleges worldwide that will give credit or advanced placement for your efforts.

For about seventy-five dollars, a student can earn credits that might otherwise cost thousands at a college or university. For students planning to attend select colleges that encourage challenging high school programs but that will not accept AP courses for college credit, enhancing their school transcript while also developing advanced skills and study habits becomes the prime motive.

Contents and standards for AP courses are set through a consensus process involving dozens of higher education faculty for each of the thirty-three AP courses. While AP does not appear to define "college-level work" explicitly, the College Board is diligent in establishing an operational definition, ensuring that the courses cover and test material that real colleges cover and test in similar courses. They use a "bottom-line approach to validating AP exam grades by

comparing the achievement of AP versus non-AP students in higher-level college courses." AP students generally do very well (i.e. get high grades) in upper level courses without completing their college's lower-level coursework.

Course descriptions are available from the College Board and include recommendations for what to teach, books that can be used, and descriptions of the contents of the AP exams. How to teach is not addressed although the College Board often directly recommends that the teacher have a major in the AP subject area.

A sampling of descriptions for AP exams reveals that most include multiple choice questions and several open-ended response type questions that require a student to show the process through which an answer or response is developed. Weighting of the sections toward the final score varies but tends toward approximately equal credit for the two sections of a test (calculus -- equal; chemistry -- 45% and 55%; history -- equal).

The number of students taking AP exams has increased some forty percent over the last five years (from 537,000 to 768,000). Questions have arisen, however, as to whether there will be a sufficient number of qualified teachers for a rapid, continued expansion of the AP program, particularly in math and science. As in any course, the quality of student learning in an AP course depends both upon the quality of the teacher and the preparation levels of the students. While the AP exams and scoring procedures function to maintain standards for student learning and the awarding of college credit, lower quality classroom experiences may shortchange students who take AP courses expecting to receive high quality instruction and have success with college-level study. The College Board must work with teacher training programs and high schools to ensure that this does not happen.

A related concern is the granting of college credit for high school study done under the auspices of an individual college. Programs vary, with students sometimes traveling to the college campuses, and college faculty sometime traveling to the high schools. In both situations, the maintenance of quality is up to the individual teacher and/or college.

In Oregon, the "Running Start" program has expanded over the last 10 years to include some 12,000 high school juniors and seniors each year enrolling in courses at both 2- and 4-year colleges. Tuition is free for the students; high schools transfer state money to the colleges that their students attend. Students may actually graduate from high school having earned an Associate's degree, saving both time and money. The program seems to have strong support from students, parents, and some educators.

At least one researcher has concerns about the lack of external evaluation to validate learning that receives college credit. Additional concerns have been raised about a lack of *transparency* -- one may not be able to tell the difference on the college's transcript between courses taken at a high school, from those taken on-campus by a matriculated student. A few colleges promote their

courses by, in effect, stating that it is easier to earn credit in their courses than through an AP course.

Several other concerns bear mentioning. After receiving advanced placement, some students may miss important freshman-level courses designed to induct students into college as well as college-level learning and to build learning communities, both formal and informal. Colleges must decide what is indispensable and what is not and adjust their waiver policies accordingly. Some schools may feel competitive pressures to grant college credit for work completed in high school, believing that the students will choose to attend another college that does accept their hours thereby saving the student tuition and allowing for early graduation. State mandates requiring course transfers may further restrict the abilities of state schools to make decisions about whether to accept and how to apply college credit earned in high school.

An answer to the question, "what is college-level learning?" remains elusive. Throughout discussions of National Panel, college-level study has variously been characterized as including 1) pronounced independence in learning, 2) rapid learning of advanced content, 3) experiences with both theory and practice, and 4) analytical, reflective, integrative and other kinds of thinking. In the continuum of learning from novice to expert, college-level learning probably lies somewhere in the middle. It is likely that some "high school level" work continues into college and that some high school students produce "college-level" work. Greater Expectations advocates for more advanced learning for all students; multiple supports (pedagogical, material, and psychological) for higher achievement in both high schools and colleges must be developed and provided if Greater Expectations for all are to be achieved.

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